

Authorial Agency in Slave Narratives: Thematic Approaches to Rhetoric

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INTRODUCTION

For many readers today, Frederick Douglass represents both the beginning and end of their exposure to slave narratives. My own exposure to the genre began with Douglass, and his text inspired the line of questioning in this project: why would nineteenth-century readers want to read these firsthand accounts from former slaves if they were going to demand authenticating documents attesting to the factuality of the black author's narrative? And how does the author retain agency in spite of this authentication? Douglass' narrative is a great text for generating these questions, but the *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass* cannot be used to provide representative answers for every slave narrative—and Douglass' experiences should not be regarded as representative for all slaves. (No single narrative or author should be considered representative for all.) In order to think through issues of representation, then, it made sense to design a project that looked beyond Douglass. In this overview, I will lay out the authors my thesis examines and introduce recurring themes that emerge from text-to-text.

One of the most common criticisms of Douglass' work is that it fails to encapsulate the female slave's experience—and therefore, his work inevitably fails to be a representative text for about half of the slave population. As Stephanie A. Smith argues, “the central historical observation that slavery had had different effects for a woman,” which would inevitably suggest “a woman's experience of slavery [would] have to be narrated in a very different way than a man's” (193). On one level, this means that the rhetorical approach used in a male narrative (i.e. Douglass' precedent of self-mastery) may not adequately depict the differences of a woman's experience. Different effects for females would also suggest that there may be a completely different set of issues depicted: what is motherhood like under slavery, referred to by many as a

“patriarchal institution”? What anxieties are expressed in a mother’s slave narrative given the fact that she knows “the child follows the condition of the mother” regardless of whether her child is also her master’s?

Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is perhaps the most obvious—and most popular—text to offer a woman’s perspective of slavery. Unlike the works of her male counterparts, the Jacobs’ account is met with skepticism precisely because she is “faced with the ‘double negative’ of black race and female gender,” and therefore must “contend with a skeptical readership that said her work could not be ‘genuine’ because of her emphasis on the domestic, her ‘melodramatic’ style, and her unwillingness to depict herself as an avatar of self-reliance” (Zafar, qtd. in Smith 191). These issues only compounded the skepticism that plagued the novel: prior to Jean Fagan Yellin, nearly everyone assumed Jacobs’ narrative to be Lydia Maria Child’s fiction—and Yellin herself admits that she had accepted “received opinion,” dismissing it “as a false narrative” where Child fictitiously claims to be editor (*Incidents* vii). Yet Yellin’s re-authentication of the novel does not change the fact that Jacobs resists Douglass’ conventional alignment of literacy and self-mastery. Jacobs does address letter-writing in her book as a means for “cunning,” but it is also the means for Dr. Flint to “perpetuate sexual violence” against Linda Brent: as Elizabeth Hewitt explains, “the fact that Flint assaults Brent with letters significantly revises the status of literacy in Jacobs’s narrative, and unlike so many other slave narratives, reading and writing are aligned not with freedom, but subjugation” (125). Jacobs offers a unique case study because she resists the notion of writing as freedom, but her appeal to female sentimentality is demonstrated by “what *Incidents* values more than anything: family bonds” (Smith 195). The narrative also reveals that family bonds—especially between mother and child—complicate a woman’s ability to escape to freedom.

Still, Jacobs' appeal to family bonds and her rejection of literacy as synonymous with freedom does not fully encapsulate the experiences of every slave woman. With this in mind, *The History of Mary Prince* offers a radically different account of the female slave's experience in a number of ways. First is the fact that Prince's narrative represents a case of amanuensis: though she relates her self-narrative to Susanna Strickland, the text is extremely reliant on the mediation of Strickland and the book's editor, Thomas Pringle. Because Prince is not herself literate, she has no opportunity to accept or reject literacy as a means to demonstrating her self-mastery. Prince also gives us an account of hard manual labor that is not typically conveyed in slave narratives (in part because those slave working outdoors would have even fewer opportunities to pursue literacy, rendering these slaves even less capable of writing their narratives), and she offers the perspective of a West Indies slave who must remain in England if she wants to remain free. From this standpoint, Prince and Jacobs share similar anxieties regarding close bonds and their rupture: Prince's husband remains in Antigua, and she cannot return to him without forfeiting her freedom. As Pringle notes in his supplement, Prince explains she "would rather go into my grave than go back to Antigua, though I wish to go back to my husband very much—very much—very much!" (*History* 39). Prince is not an American slave, but her narrative reveals that even a "free" slave never has complete agency or freedom.

Finally, I examine William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or, the President's Daughter* as a particularly unique fictional slave narrative. Brown's fiction is interesting in part because he uses his own narrative as an authenticating document for the novel—a move that allows him to retain total agency over his text. In his assessment of *Clotel*, Robert Stepto asserts that "Brown does not skirmish with other authenticators for authorial control of the text," and as a result "Brown's narrative is not so much a tale of personal history as it is a conceit upon the authorial

mode of the white guarantor” (27). While it is certainly true that Brown retains his full stake in authorial control, I would argue that Brown still offers a personal history that, like Douglass’ history, demonstrates self-mastery. Family ties do not hinder Brown’s flight to the North, and literacy implicitly plays a large role in the narrative: Brown writes in the third person in order to establish a more historical-factual tone, and he is able to modify his narrative in order to present himself as a knowledgeable and trustworthy author. Even more intriguing is the profoundly moralizing tone of the novel, which repeatedly indicates that Clotel has a rightful stake in freedom as the daughter of Thomas Jefferson; at the same time, referencing a founding father of American democracy suggests the hypocrisy of slavery. Brown also gives expression to the “racial limbo” of characters who are “neither black nor white,” often looked down upon by whites and resented by their fellow slaves. In doing so, Brown is able to suggest the triviality of racial difference—and thus the triviality of slavery’s racialized justifications (Fabi vii).

Throughout this project, the working conceit for my thesis had been to think through moments where authors exert their agency through their rhetorical choices. What became evident as my research continued, however, was that authorial agency must contend with the demands of the reader. Philip Gould explains that the appeal of slave narratives “lay in a number of factors: an evangelical reading market, the motifs of captivity and enslavement, the allure of [...] high adventure, and, often the allure of the exotic” (21). It became difficult to differentiate an appeal to scripture, for instance, as a means to gain respect from the audience or if it was simply as prerequisite feature. The individual sections of this essay are divided more by common strategies among Prince, Brown, and Jacobs than overtly referencing agency throughout each section. That said, the first section on the slave body as representing a form of “resource extraction” underscores the largely nonexistent agency that slaves are given over their own

bodies and the control their masters have to totally debilitate their slaves. The second section attempts to encapsulate the multiple employments of the word “poor” in all three texts, illustrating how the appeal to pathos corresponds with larger claims about mistreatment and inequality—and often, how “poor” is a label given from one slave to another, indicating a kind of solidarity. The following section on “cunning” uses Harriet Jacobs’ language, examining the necessity of deceit by slaves in order to obtain liberty in an unjust society. Finally, this essay concludes by thinking through the critiques these narrators make of (un)civil society and their calls to action from their white readers. At the same time, the final section works to question whether our contemporary society can be regarded as civil.

TALES OF RESOURCE EXTRACTION: REFRAMING THE TERMS OF SLAVERY

In Thomas Pringle’s editorial postscript to the second edition of *The History of Mary Prince*, he explains to readers that “Mary Prince has been afflicted with a disease in the eyes, which, it is feared, may terminate in total blindness” (4). While Pringle does not explicitly claim Prince’s disease was brought on by the conditions she endured under slavery, he seems to suggest that Prince’s blindness is a byproduct of her labor. Pringle’s disclosure of Prince’s physical limitations is reiterated throughout her narration and in his later assessment of her character. Throughout the text, the implicit argument is that the hard labor required of Prince as a slave has severely limited her ability to work for pay in Pringle’s home. Harriet Jacobs offers a similar account of the effects of hard labor under slavery as Linda Brent recalls the conditions that hastened her Aunt Nancy’s death. Through these instances, the narratives in the *History* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* give expression to slavery as a version of resource extraction: the slaves are their master’s resources. Slaves have their vitality extracted at the same time that they are forced to extract value from raw materials (e.g. harvesting cotton in the South or salt in

the West Indies). In this sense, Prince's and Brent's masters can be thought of simultaneously as oppressors and extractors who sap their resource (their slaves) completely—with very little regard for preserving their slave's physical health or livelihood, even to the point of jeopardizing the possible benefit of being able to exploit their slaves' labor for a longer time period.

In the case of Mary Prince, physical disability provides a uniquely discernible example of the exhaustive effects of slave labor. She describes one owner, Mr. D—, as immediately sending her “to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves” (19). Prince details the tasks of the slaves' labor, speaking for the group by recalling “We then shoveled up the salt in large heaps, and went down to the sea, where we washed the pickle from our limbs, and cleaned the barrows and shovels from the salt” (19). Through this recollection, we are able to see that Prince is literally tasked with her own resource extraction project—collecting salt for her master's profit—while her master concurrently “extracts” labor from her. At the same time, Prince's description of becoming herself pickled and salted suggests that her labor has transformed her into a commodity very much like what she is extracting. We can also see that the process of extracting slave labor is one that does not prioritize sustainability of the black body (let alone the individual), which can be readily replaced by another. Under Mr. D—'s control, Prince would work “from four o'clock in the morning till nine [...] then called again to our tasks, and worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters in those parts which were not completely covered” (19). Prince explicitly states that this mistreatment affects her ability to labor, and the boils that cover her feet after spending hours in saltwater render Prince “unable to wheel the barrow fast through the sand, which got into the sores, and made [her] stumble at every step” (20). While her master refuses to acknowledge her suffering—or lessen her workload so she might recover—Prince is quick to assert “there was

nothing very remarkable” in her suffering; instead, she argues her account “might serve as a sample of the common usage of the slaves” in the West Indies that might make visible the routinely severe cruelties of labor to her British audience (20).

Another example of the unrelenting, all-consuming “common usage” of slave labor is illustrated through Prince’s account of “Poor” Hetty’s suffering under Captain I—. Hetty is described as being responsible for a seemingly endless number of jobs: she must tend to all of the livestock, prepare meals, do the housework, and care for the children—and she must do so according to their master’s and mistress’ timelines. These concurrent demands prove impossible for Hetty, who is whipped by her master immediately after Hetty tells her mistress she has “not yet” completed all her tasks. Prince relates her experience hearing “the cracking of the thong, and the house [ringing] to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, ‘Oh Massa! Massa! me dead. Massa! have mercy on upon me—don’t kill me outright’” (14). By begging for her life, Hetty precisely demonstrates the relationship between her labor as the master’s commodity and the way her mortality is reduced to whether that extraction of labor is sufficient (according to her master’s standards).

Prince later informs us that Hetty’s “death was hastened [...] by the dreadful chastisement she received from her master during her pregnancy” (15). That Captain I— flogs Hetty to death further illuminates how preserving the slave’s body for future labor is not a primary concern. Rather, Captain I— chooses to punish a slave who is already limited physically (due to the fact Hetty is pregnant) and cannot manage her typical workload at that present moment. Hetty’s death also underscores that the constant, present-moment demand for labor by a master prevails over long-term benefits: Hetty would have been able to return to more difficult labor after the birth of her child. By killing Hetty, Captain I— also loses the future

economic value of the stillborn slave child and the ability to exploit its labor. Though exploiting Hetty's labor is a version of resource extracting for Captain I—, this disregard for future benefits suggests the immediate “boom” of extraction is favored over the possibility of an eventual “bust” (such as lost economic value). To continue the metaphor of resource extraction, this disregard potentially suggests the apathy slaveholders might feel if they view slave bodies as a renewable or replaceable resource; an exhausted slave body can nearly always be replenished with a new slave body—and quite possibly, this model of replenishing one laboring body with another allows for continuous upgrades to younger or stronger labor.

Though Prince's experiences under Captain D— and Captain I— highlight the physically demanding nature of slave labor (and the physical nature of punishment), it is during her time with the Woods that many of the effects of resource extraction begin to plague her. After being sold to the Woods, Prince tells us that she “soon fell ill of the rheumatism, and grew so very lame that I was forced to walk with a stick” (25). Prince is quick to assert that “[she] got the rheumatism by catching cold at the pond side, from washing in the fresh water; in the salt water [she] never got cold” (25). Here, the effects of poor labor conditions in Bermuda leave her body ill-equipped to handle change. Prince also develops St. Anthony's fire in her leg, which she might have been less capable of fend off if we assume that her overworked body likely weakened her immune system. Nonetheless, the Woods make very few accommodations for Prince's physical ailments: though her mistress sent “a little food” during her illness, Mrs. Wood is described as not caring “to take any trouble about [Prince]” (26). Prince's assertions about the Woods' apathy toward her are supported by the fact that the Woods do not want to invest much time or energy into helping Prince recover, simply waiting until Prince is “well enough to work in the house” (26). Very few concessions are made when Prince is ultimately “well enough” to

work: that her rheumatism is a chronic condition is given little consideration as the Woods begin to demand constant physical labor of her. Mrs. Woods is constantly irritated with Prince because of the inefficiency of the latter's labor (essentially, that Prince cannot complete her tasks on Mrs. Woods' constructed timeline), and Mrs. Woods becomes "vexed" with Prince "because [she] fell sick and [she] could not keep up" with her work (27). Essentially, the established expectations to which Prince is held fail to account for the physical limitations brought on by her labor. Again, this overall disregard for limitations suggest a prioritization of a perpetual immediacy—all tasks must be done according to the master's timelines, and there is no end to these tasks—to exploit the slave's labor; there is almost no acceptance by slaveholders that the slave's physical ability to labor might deteriorate, and there is no concerted effort by the Woods to ensure that Prince might provide useful service in the future. After all, Prince can be replaced so long as someone else completes the labor. That Prince was an investment (insofar as she was purchased) is seemingly inconsequential; instead, her value seems to become affixed to the ability to control his commodity, and we are later told that Mr. Woods is "so firmly bent against any arrangement having her freedom for its object, that the negotiation was soon broken off as helpless" (*History* 41).

Ultimately, Prince's rheumatism results in a slightly different set of consequences in England. Prince tells us "the rheumatism seized all [her] limbs worse than ever" upon their arrival, but her mistress "took no great notice of it" when Prince shows her swelling to Mrs. Wood. In England, Prince's rheumatism provides the Woods with more explicit means to demonstrate their continued control over her. By refusing to acknowledge the doctor's warnings that "washing did not agree" with Mary's "sickly body," Mrs. Woods is able to demonstrably adhere to her promise that "she did not intend to treat [Prince] any better in England than in the

West Indies” (31). Essentially, the Woods’ demands remain the same regardless of Mary’s physical limitation; their demands also remain consistent despite the fact that Prince is technically free in England and could find paid labor elsewhere. The Woods ultimately respond to Prince’s complaints about their lack of compassion for her pain by threatening to kick her out—and when Prince is “unwilling to go away” due to the fact that she does not know the city, they use Prince’s hesitance as an opportunity to abuse her even more. In this sense, the physical effects of labor add to the Woods’ power to manipulate and abuse Prince because they realize this physical disadvantage compounds Prince’s other disadvantage of seemingly having nowhere to turn in England.

When Mary Prince accompanies the Woods to England, she does so with the hope that she “should probably get cured” of her rheumatism in London (*History* 31). Instead, we learn that Prince’s rheumatism “seized her limbs worse than ever,” yet the Woods disregard her pain and continue to demand her labor as they always have (31). Prince’s protestations only anger the Woods, who “opened the door and bade me to get out” because they believe Prince to be ungrateful (32). In her reading of the similar labor demanded of Frado in *Our Nig*, Sidney Jones argues that “debilitation shows us that labor in the 1800s for blacks was a dead-end” where blacks are simply “seen as work-horses that whites exploited until they were crippled or dead” (S. Jones 4). The broader implication is that this perception and exploitation of blacks is not affixed to slavery: instead, the “ability to do work and contribute” to a “nation’s capitalist economy” remains a racialized issue (S. Jones 4). Prince’s rheumatism nearly renders her incapable of generating labor value for the Woods, and she does not afford them emotional satisfaction because she does not act appropriately subservient by their standards. As Prince

distances herself from the Woods, it becomes important for Prince to prove her value and her character through her labor in British society.

While Jones is specifically thinking about the imperative of black labor within an American context, Prince's labor is often referenced when Pringle writes in support of her character to a British audience. In his supplement to the *History*, Pringle claims his employment of Prince renders him "enabled to speak to her conduct and character with a degree of confidence [he] could not have otherwise done" (42). Pringle later refers to Prince's time working for his family as an "ample period of observation" in which Prince "conducted herself in that charge with the utmost discretion and fidelity" (55). Pringle does not view her as a mere workhorse to be exploited, but it does seem as though Mary's work makes her constantly subjected to the Pringles' judgment of her labor—and seemingly following an early notion of a Protestant ethic, this labor judgment is used to reach judgments on Prince's moral character. Pringle concedes to readers that Prince is not "a very expert housemaid, nor capable of much hard work, (for her constitution appears to be a good deal broken,) but she is careful, industrious, and anxious to do her duty and to give satisfaction" (55). Though Pringle is somewhat critical of Prince's labor here—and in this way, leaves Prince vulnerable to readers' judgment—he humanizes Prince by praising her ability to form "strong attachments" and advocates for her character by speaking to Prince's desire "to do her duty." At the same time, Pringle's criticisms of Prince's labor might be viewed as a criticism of the labor system under slavery extracting Prince of her vitality because of its inefficiency. Under Pringle, Prince's relationship with labor fundamentally changes; although labor is no longer painfully extracted from her (in terms of the physical nature of her work in the West Indies and with the Woods, as well as in terms of physical injuries

resulting from punishment for “inadequate” labor), her work still defines her insofar as Prince must necessarily prove her character to Pringle—and her white readers—through her work.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs offers a similar account of extractive physical labor debilitating Brent’s Aunt Nancy. Like Prince, Nancy is physically worn down by her labor, and she is described as having “slept on the floor in the entry, near Mrs. Flint’s chamber door, that she might be within call” at any time of day (183). Nancy’s own desire to become a mother is never realized because she the “night-nurse to Mrs. Flint’s children,” and after years of “toiling all day, and being deprived of rest at night [...] Dr. Flint declared it was impossible she could ever become the mother of a living child” (184). As such, the Flints labor Nancy without consideration that her child would eventually become another body to exploit. Though Brent explains that the Flints are in fact invested in keeping Nancy alive because she is valuable servant, her labor is exploited to the extent that Nancy “had been slowly murdered” by the toll of her labor (186). Mrs. Flint continues to exploit Nancy even after her death: Brent speculates that Mrs. Flint’s sentimental reaction to Nancy’s passing provided Flint with “a beautiful illustration of the attachment existing between slaveholder and slave,” desiring that “the body of her old worn-out servant [should be] buried at her feet” (187). Here, Mrs. Flint’s desire to express the closeness of her relationship to the slave she slowly kills closely resembles the relationship the lawyer in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” attempts to maintain with the titular character; Flint and lawyer are both interested in utilizing the laborers they had exploited to “cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval” (Melville 50).

Interestingly, Dr. Flint’s advances toward Linda Brent do exemplify sex and virginity as additional “resources” to extract for masters to extract from female slaves, affording Flint control over Brent and encouraging her to view herself as less valuable because she values her virginity.

Dr. Flint begins “to whisper foul words” in Brent’s ear, and Flint “resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes”—namely, to coerce Brent into sex (*Incidents* 33). Brent struggles to resist these advances because she feels she cannot confess these exchanges to her family, seemingly believing that even engaging in conversations about sex will compromise her family’s perception of her “purity” and permanently erase the value of her virginity. Brent resolves that her best option is to deprive Dr. Flint of the opportunity to take her virginity by sleeping with someone else instead. Though Brent clearly feels she has compromised her self-worth, she expresses “a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in telling *him* [Dr. Flint]” that she is pregnant (72). Through this account, Jacobs suggests it is at least better for a slave girl to proactively pursue a kind of resource extraction (the loss of virginity) on her own terms rather than allowing her master that opportunity to strip his slave of the value ascribed to a woman’s virginity.

While Pringle wants to minimize the descriptions of sexual relations in the *History*, this minimizing potentially speaks to a similar idea of extraction: essentially, offering an account of Prince’s sexual history would serve to strip Prince of her value in 19th century British society. For Pringle’s part, we might view the omission of Prince’s sexual history as attempting to avoid the attacks proslavery men made against Prince: in Sue Thomas’ analysis of the libel trials surrounding the *History*’s publication, she notes attacks on Pringle’s character through “unmistakable sexual innuendos, which suggest [...] that Pringle was probably having a sexual relationship with Prince,” and allowing the details of previous sexual relationships would only give them greater liberties to attack Prince’s baseness (118). Though a certain lack of disclosure might have benefited Pringle, it certainly benefited Prince as well. Pringle justifies the omission of Prince’s alleged sexual relationship with Captain Abbot, stating that “the circumstance here mentioned” regarding this relationship as “too indecent to appear in a publication likely to be

perused by females” (*History* 44). Pringle clearly desires to help Prince’s narrative appeal to readers’ sympathy, and this task would be more difficult if those readers found themselves questioning Prince’s Christian morality and chastity. However, Pringle does allow Prince to reveal Mr. D—’s “ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering [her] to wash him in a tub of water” (24). While Pringle remains invested in allowing Prince to demonstrate her morality, he might have felt this account would serve that purpose. Prince confesses that “her eyes were so full of shame,” and she views having to bathe her master as worse “than all the licks” she receives (24). Though some might view Prince’s task as damaging her “purity,” Pringle seemingly believes readers will accept acts of coercion more than acts of consent—and not de-value Prince (here, in the context of Christian purity) for the coercion she to which she is subjected.

Ultimately, Prince’s and Jacobs’ narratives demonstrate a kind of inevitability to the slave body as a resource for slaveholder to extract from however he so chooses. As Jacqueline Jones writes, “American slavery was an economic and political system by which a group of whites extracted as much labor as possible from blacks [...] through the use of threat or force” (13). This definition of slavery also works to describe Mary Prince’s subjection to exploitative labor in the West Indies, and her narrative demonstrates the extraction of physical abilities from the slave. While Mrs. Flint extends this extraction of value to “cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval,” Prince’s eventual loss of eyesight provides an early prototype for *Bartleby* as well (as each individual loses their vision as a possible consequence of exploited labor under capitalism): just as *Bartleby* is mentally and physically broken down by capitalism—a breakdown that begins before he repeatedly announces he “would prefer not to” engage in exploitative labor—Prince struggles to accomplish satisfactory work for the Pringles because of her body’s deterioration

under the hyper-extractive, hyper-exploitative version of labor that slavery represents. While Nancy's, Prince's, and Hetty's bodies are broken down by these exploitative and extractive versions of labor, Linda Brent shows us that sexuality is another resource that masters attempt to extract. Though very little resistance is ultimately capable of combating this labor structure, it is possible to suggest that each character is eventually freed of their oppression, albeit in extremely compromising terms: Brent refuses to allow Flint to take her virginity from her; Hetty and Nancy are "freed" through her death, and Hetty's stillborn child cannot be enslaved; and Prince remains legally free in England, although she is not free to return to her husband in Antigua.

THE CONNOTATIONS OF "POOR": FORGING SOLIDARITY AND CRITIQUING SLAVERY

In the span of the 70 pages that make up the *History of Mary Prince*, the word "poor" appears 53 times. While I initially assumed the frequency of this word might simply be attributed to what Pringle classified as "Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology" (that she simply utilized more repetitive word choices), it became clear that the *History* was not the only slave narrative that frequently employed "poor" as part of its discourse (3). In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs uses the word 101 times in 259 pages, and William Wells Brown uses "poor" 60 times in the 209 pages of the 1853 edition of *Clotel*. Many scholars have noted the use of "poor" as a word simply intended to convey sympathy, with a few only slightly expanding that meaning. In A.M. Rauwerda's assessment of the *History*, she suggests that "poor" often connotes kinship or "a claiming of allegiance with a different experience," implying "sympathy as well as empathy" between Prince and the other slaves (403). Philip Gould notes that white sympathy for "representations of the 'poor slave' often had primitivist tendencies that reflected some form of the 'noble savage' trope," suggesting Jacobs' admission of "moral

weakness” used the poor slave representation to appeal to “an abolitionist culture that readily figured African-Americans as culturally deficient” (25). Still, these ideas of what poor conveys seem too broad when considering the nuanced meanings within the aforementioned narratives. In my analysis of the different uses of poor throughout each text, it became clear that the word’s connotations—and the frequency at which the word would appear—varies greatly across geographic space and in light of the racial identity of the person being referred to as “poor.” The uses of poor among slaves referencing one another often demonstrate pity or sympathy, and the extension of this sympathy serves to convey solidarity. In contrast, “poor whites” nearly always expresses economic disadvantage. This basic difference of meaning between a “poor white” and a “poor slave” broadly signifies the essential difference between the experiences of acutely oppressed slaves and supposedly disadvantaged whites. Beyond exclusively appealing to pathos, then, “poor” simultaneously contributes to each narrator’s critiques of slave culture.

Admittedly, the vast majority of the uses of poor in the *History* do serve to appeal to sympathy. The earliest instance where “poor” is used to appeal to readers’ sympathy for slaves occurs as Prince describes her mother being forced to bring Mary and her siblings to market to be sold. Mary recalls their family’s last “sorrowful meeting” when her mother addresses her as “one of my poor picaninnies” and again as “one of the poor slave-brood who are to be sold tomorrow” (*History* 10). Prince directly invokes the ties between sympathy and kinship when she describes her “poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children,” demonstrating the sympathy that unites members of a slave family while also appealing to pathos. Mary again appeals to pathos at the same time that she humanizes her mother, who exclaims she is “*shrouding*” her “poor children; what a task for a mother!” (10). Just as Prince is able to humanize her mother, she juxtaposes this recollection of the poor slave family being separated with her own critique of

the white slaveholders and sellers who separate black mothers from their children. While the “poor slave heart” experiences “the bitter pains which follow such separations as these,” Prince asserts “those white people” who perpetuate slavery “have small hearts [and] can only feel for themselves” (10-11). Notably, those same proslavery whites cannot understand the extent of their oppression towards blacks in part because they have never faced the possibility of familial rupture.

After Prince is sold, “poor” is used to invoke a new kinship among Captain I—’s slaves, who sympathetically caution Mary by saying “‘Poor child, poor child!’ [...] ‘you must have a good heart, if you are to live here’” (*History* 13). While this exchange further humanizes the slaves (because it demonstrates they are capable of sympathy), it also serves to signify a moment in which “poor” becomes an indicator suggesting the naiveté one slave might have: the phrase “poor child” then refers to someone—typically, a female slave—who cannot yet fathom that their situation is about to worsen. In *Incidents*, Linda’s grandmother exclaims “Poor child! Poor child!” after learning of her granddaughter’s pregnancy (74). While this response might be thought of as Brent’s grandmother simply expressing her pity that Brent has “disgraced” her by having a child out of wedlock, Brent is ultimately naïve to hope that having a child might result in her being sold by Dr. Flint to the baby’s father. More specifically, “poor child” might hint at Linda’s naiveté to the unique sorrows of motherhood under slavery that Brent’s grandmother has already experienced: like Prince’s mother and like her grandmother, she risks eventually being separated from her children. “Poor” then marks a kind of solidarity between Brent and her grandmother: though her grandmother does not approve of Linda’s actions, she chooses to protect Linda from Dr. Flint however she can.

When Prince uses “poor” as a descriptor, Prince affixes the “poor” label to herself and other slaves at the heights of their oppression. A prime example is Prince’s portrayal of Hetty (who is almost always referred to in the text as “poor Hetty”). “Poor Hetty” leads “a most miserable life,” and she is eventually reduced by their owner to “the poor creature [...] tied up to a tree in the yard” (*History* 15). Prince continues to tell us Poor Hetty is “repeatedly flogged,” and she eventually dies from the injuries sustained from their master’s blows. After Hetty’s death, Mary becomes the new most-oppressed slave on the plantation, and her mistress has Prince beaten when she accidentally breaks a jar; her master beats her “again and again” for this so-called offense until her body is “all blood and bruises” (*History* 16-17). It is after this incident that the other slaves consider Mary the “poor child!” (again, suggesting that Mary remains naïve to the inevitability that she will become the hardest-worked slave) who experiences “no end to [her] toils—no end to [her] blows” (*History* 17).

Though William Wells Brown does not use “poor” as frequently in *Clotel* as Prince or Jacobs do in their accounts, Brown regularly uses the word to appeal to sympathy in his personal narrative. In many of these instances within the third-person narration, Brown uses “poor” to relay his experience witnessing the cruel treatment of other slaves. One example of this is when the narrator tells us that “William saw a slave murdered” as that slave attempted to run away, recalling “the poor panting slave, in almost breathless accents” pleading with his pursuers by repeatedly explaining he “did not steal the meat” as he had been accused of (*Clotel* 11). Similarly, the narrator criticizes the “religious characteristic of the American slaveholder” who “but a few hours before, had arrested poor panting, fugitive slaves,” arguing that God would not consecrate “the infernal act he had just committed” against such helpless individuals (14-15). In these examples, “poor” inspires sympathy at the same time that Brown implicitly expresses his

solidarity with fellow slaves—and invoking the “poor panting slave” further allows Brown to indict those white individuals who oppress defenseless, victimized slaves. The repeated pairing of “poor” with “panting” signifies the extent of the fugitive’s perpetual desperation and exhaustion.

Additionally, Brown employs a particular vocabulary in order to inspire pathos in his readers. In particular, the word “poor” is used to describe various suffering slaves throughout the narrative. In his own narrative, Brown describes himself as the “poor fugitive” who becomes depressed “by his weary journey” (19). In *Clotel*, it is “poor Althesa” who nearly “wept herself to death, for the first two days after her mother had been torn from her side” and “poor Mary” never forgets the way Clotel “kissed away her fears, and gazed into her beautiful eyes with a deep, deep sadness of expression” (Brown 57, 91). These passages speak to the pitiable condition of enslaved African Americans, but these characters’ perpetual poorness signifies the constant deprivation these individuals experience: in Brown’s case, the fugitive version of himself is deprived of shelter as he flees through the forest as well as the optimism for freedom he might have had at the beginning of his flight. In the cases of Althesa and Mary, the word “poor” cues the realistic melodrama of slavery caused by the inevitable separation of a child from her mother. Throughout the novel, dozens of other slaves are described as “poor” in the moments their conditions are most pitiable—not simply because of their poverty, but rather because of the overall desperation and deprivation (economic and emotional) their roles as slaves necessarily entail.

Just as “poor” can mark an appeal to sympathy or solidarity when referring to slaves, the word often serves to make different distinctions when it describes a white individual. That said, poor retains its sympathetic connotations in the *History* as Prince expresses the pity she and

others slaves felt for one of her earliest mistresses, Mrs. Williams. Prince refers to Mrs. Williams as “my poor mistress” twice, explaining that her “poor mistress bore [her husband’s] ill treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her” (*History* 8). Prince loves Mrs. Williams because she “was a kind-hearted good woman, and she treated all her slaves well,” giving less taxing work to the slave children and allowing the children to play with her daughter “with as much freedom almost as if she had been our sister” (7). While Mrs. Williams inspires pity from her slaves in part because of this more reasonable treatment, “poor” is possibly ascribed to Mrs. Williams because she also suffers ill treatment from their master. Just as the slaves “dreaded” Mr. Williams’ “return from sea,” Prince reveals that Mrs. Williams “was herself very much afraid of him; and, during his stay at home, seldom dared to show her usual kindness to the slaves” (7-8). Though Mrs. Williams does not experience the same deprivation of freedom that the slaves do—or the same level of mistreatment from Mr. Williams—her kindness and her suffering seemingly grant her a kind of solidarity with her slaves that is not typically given to white individuals in slave narratives.

Another instance in which a white character is extended the sympathetic “poor” occurs when Brown references Salome Muller’s enslavement in *Clotel*. Described as “perfectly white,” the fictionalized Salome expresses her fears to Althesa because she “was once severely flogged for telling a stranger that [she] was not born a slave” (117). While Althesa is immediately sympathetic to the free-born German woman, Salome is referred to as “the slave woman”—and later, she is the “poor woman” who must be rescued “from the horrid life of a slave” by her fellow passenger on the *Amazon*, Mrs. Marshall (118). By incorporating the basic details of the real-life Salome Muller, Brown recognizes that there is virtually no essential difference between the wrongful oppression of “the poor [white] woman” accidentally enslaved and black slaves:

both are deserving of sympathy, and the conditions of enslavement are wrongful regardless of race. More importantly, Brown uses this account of accidental enslavement to illustrate the misguided nature of an antebellum society “that clearly equated slave status with black skin”—especially because this society’s “ideas about slavery and race were not nearly as clear cut as many whites believed” (Wilson 134). Tying into *Clotel*’s broader premise—that Clotel and Althesa are just as entitled to freedom as their biological father, Thomas Jefferson, and that racial divisions are a misguided social construct—the depiction of poor Salome does not disregard her experiences simply because she is white.

Notably, the implications of poor—and the rate at which the word appears—change based on the geographic setting of the narration. In *Clotel* as well as in the *Incidents*, for example, the need to appeal to sympathy does not seem as pressing in the North. When Brown is still in flight, he still refers to “the love of freedom” that burned in his “poor slave’s bosom” (18). Brown further expresses that “the thought that every white man was his deadly enemy” was “what crushed the poor slave’s heart in flight the most.” Brown uses poor not simply to appeal to pity, but rather to indict the nation which deprives him of “his birth-right, freedom,” where “[e]ven in the free states the prejudice against colour is so strong, that there appears to exist a deadly antagonism between the white and coloured races” (18). In *Clotel*’s flight with her fellow slave, William, “poor” is only used once prior to their journey. The absence of the word is significant, and that absence potentially illustrates the fact that Clotel does not face oppression by masquerading as an invalid white man: essentially, her masquerade grants her freedom and agency prior to reaching free soil. Upon arriving “in a Free State,” however, Clotel tells William to go to Canada and announces that she “shall go to Virginia in search of [her] daughter” (144). Simply, the free states are not free enough to offer William the same security that Canada

provides former slaves—and Clotel cannot experience total liberty because she remains separated from her daughter.

Similarly, *Incidents* portrays the North as a place of tentative freedom. Initially, sympathetic connotation of poor only apply to members of Brent's family who remain in the South: Dr. Flint attempts to persuade Linda to return in a letter (signed as if it had been written by his son) that argues Brent's family "will be rejoiced to see you; and your poor old grandmother expressed a great desire to have you come, when she heard your letter read" (*Incidents* 220). Oddly, Flint's appeal underscores a message of incomplete freedom similar to Clotel's—one that suggests the inability to retain family ties dispels any misconception that complete liberty exists for African Americans in the free states. Moreover, the pledge that Brent would be "almost as free" if she returned further suggests that even the best alternatives to slavery limit black agency because nearly all options to pursue freedom require a compromise that white Americans never face. White individuals in the North are occasionally described as "poor," but this is always in the economic sense of the word. Mr. Thorne is characterized as becoming "poor and reckless long before he left the south, and such persons had much rather go to one of the faithful old slaves to borrow a dollar, or good a good dinner, than to go to one whom they consider an equal" (229). Here, the economic definition of poor demonstrates a stratification in which economically disadvantaged whites remain superior to blacks despite the fact that both populations are free in New York. When the Fugitive Slave Law goes into effect, Brent resumes her use of "poor" to inspire pity. Brent gives expression to "the thrilling voices of poor hunted colored people," also noting that "[m]any a poor washer-woman who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and stranger her fortune among strangers in Canada" (245). "Poor" has

tremendous utility, signifying the solidarity of the united voices of hunted black people, extending pity to African Americans who have toiled only to have all their accumulated capital stripped from them, and helping to critique the nation more generally because it forces black people born in the United States to turn to “strangers” rather than enabling them to remain free in their native land. This critique of the United States is also an indictment of neoliberalism because “poor” black workers are not allowed to retain the possessions they accrue through their individual labor (at the same time that white workers who may not be subject to similar hard labor will not need to choose between their possessions and their freedom).

Finally, each narrative uses Europe—primarily England—to extend its criticism of the slave societies the narrators are opposing. For Prince, England at once represents a place where some justice exists—servants have wages, and there is “no punishment, except for wicked people”—and yet where some believe “slaves can be quite happy in slavery” (*History* 38). Prince believes it is her duty to “say the truth to the English people,” advocating for “all the poor blacks” in the West Indies to “be given free” (38). The task of revealing the truth of “poor blacks” in the colonies is crucial because Prince believes England to be complicit in allowing slavery to continue on the islands. Thomas Pringle supports Prince’s charge of complicity, writing in all capital letters that “NO SLAVE CAN EXIST WITHIN THE SHORES OF GREAT BRITAIN,” including its colonies (*History* 63). Similarly, Brown includes portions of his speeches in England, revealing “[t]he prejudice which I have experienced on all and every occasion in the United States, and to some degree on board the *Canada*, vanished as soon as I set foot on the soil in Britain” (*Clotel* 32). Brown also calls for British action to address slavery in the States at the conclusion of his novel, imploring British Christians to make it “unequivocally understood, that no fellowship can be held with slaveholders professing the same common

Christianity” as themselves (*Clotel* 209). Jacobs’ Linda Brent acknowledges her “situation” in London hotels as “indescribably more pleasant” than in American hotels, and she asserts that her trip to London represented the first time she was treated “without reference to [her] complexion” (*Incidents* 234-235). Finally, Brent dispenses of the notion that “the oppression of the poor in Europe” is comparable to the oppression of slavery. By her estimation, even “the poorest poor” was

vastly superior to the condition of the most favored slaves in America. They labored hard; but they were not ordered out to toil while the stars were in the sky, and driven and slashed by an overseer, through heat and cold, till the stars shone out again. Their homes were very humble, but they were protected by law (*Incidents* 235-236).

Again, we are given to understand that the economically poor have greater status, agency, and even protections than the poor, pitiable slave. While Brent does not deny their oppression, she argues that British society is far more invested in improving conditions for their poor population than the free states and abolitionists are in improving the conditions for African Americans.

Throughout these slave narratives, “poor” is used to advance certain criticisms of slave society at the same time that the language demands affective response. While the majority of these uses do involve appeals to sympathy, it is important to think through the myriad reasons each narrator finds these appeals necessary. In Jacobs’ *Incidents*, “poor” often serves to distinguish the difference between mere economic oppression of whites in Europe and the pitiable mistreatment of American slaves. Prince and Jacobs also use “poor child” and “poor girl” as markers that indicate a certain naiveté toward the particular exploitations faced by female slaves, at once suggesting, to a lesser degree, the possibility that female slaves are inevitably

referred to in juvenile terms. Ultimately, “poor” often becomes a marker of solidarity between slaves with a variety of experiences. By referring to their fellow sufferers as “poor slaves” or “poor fugitives” as they so often do, Jacobs, Prince, and Brown humanize themselves to their readers at the same time that they work to advocate for all black slaves. As Prince explains she cannot “tell [her] own sorrows” without thinking of her fellow slaves’ griefs, Brown and Jacobs share a collective investment to acknowledge the poor, pitiable treatment of all slaves.

“CUNNING WITH CUNNING”: OUTTHINKING PROSLAVERY LOGIC AND AUTHORIAL REPRESENTATION

While Jacobs and Brown largely dictate their audience’s perceptions through affective appeals and word choices, their narratives simultaneously give expression to the ways a slave might succeed in modifying the terms of their enslavement. In many cases, modifying the terms of enslavement might be illustrated through a standard slave narration “from captivity to enlightenment to (manly) resistance and finally escape” (Smith 195). Though this model works for Brown’s self-narrative, “manly” resistance is not a particularly viable rhetoric to encapsulate the experience of female characters like Linda Brent or Clotel. Rather than following the standard template of self-mastery, Brent expresses her resolve “to match [her] cunning” with Dr. Flint’s (*Incidents*). Brent goes on to detail her “cunning” as a means to distance herself—literally and figuratively—from Flint’s control. Brent’s primary means for cunning Flint is through letters, but her attempts to deceive Flint in order to gain leverage are exemplified throughout the text. Similarly, Clotel cunningly masquerades as a white man in her flight to the North, and her daughter Mary later trades places with George so that he can escape prison. These characters demonstrate the necessity of wit and deception to resist the tremendous control

slaveholders hold over them, largely displaying an equally necessary self-reliance to find their own solutions to deal with the issues caused by their oppression.

In order to convey the necessity of deception, Brent recalls Dr. Flint's attempts to coerce her into having sex with him. As her master begins to tell Brent of his intentions, her best strategy was to try "to treat [his advances] with indifference or contempt" even as she "could not remain ignorant of their import" (*Incidents* 33). Though Brent hopes her ambivalence will put an end to Flint's advances, we are later shown the ways in which Dr. Flint uses her methods against her. Brent's attempts to feign incomprehension are eventually grounds for "curses and threats bestowed on [her]," and her later attempt to teach herself to write provides Flint with a new means "to advance his favorite scheme" (39). Flint hopes to enlist Linda "in the service of her own degradation" by forcing her to read his suggestive letters, yet she continues her attempts to resist through a false ignorance (Hewitt 125). Flint utilizes his own methods for cunning, however, and he dismisses her self-protecting deception by reading the letters to her (and ensuring she understands them). Brent frames this coercion as an inevitable condition of reaching puberty in her "fifteenth year," an event she classifies as "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" (*Incidents* 33). While this phrasing indicates that the sexual coercion Brent experiences is a representative one, the specifics of Flint's counter-deception suggests that appeals to ignorance will not be enough to save Brent from her oppression.

Because Linda realizes she cannot not simply pretend to misunderstand Flint's meaning, she decides to pursue a relationship with a free man. Though I refer to this resolution in an earlier passage as a means for Brent to deprive Flint of a form of resource extraction (he will not take her virginity), she briefly views this relationship as a possible means to be freed from Flint's control. In turn, Flint refuses to consent to any sale—especially one to Brent's lover—and

maintains his power over her, offering that she might take one of his slaves as a husband instead. Brent refuses this concession, and she tells us “no animal ever watched its prey more narrowly” than Flint after her this rejection of “the base proposals” of his advances (50-51). She continues to resist interpretation of his letters, but this attempt at deception continually fails because Flint knows she can read. After this deception fails, Flint eventually attempts to gain control by building a house where he intends to make Brent live—and in turn, Brent makes a “deliberate calculation” to begin a new relationship with Mr. Sands, hoping Flint might sell her to Sands (69). Yet again, this attempt to gain control backfires: Brent becomes pregnant, and Flint’s outrage strengthens his resolve to retain his control.

Furthermore, Linda’s children become an essential means for Flint to exert his emotional control over her. As we learn from Brent’s failed attempt to secure freedom through pregnancy—and from her grandmother’s disappointment in Linda’s choice to engage in extramarital relations—motherhood serves to create a new set of problems for a slave: though Linda’s family ultimately supports her, the fact that “the children follow the condition of the mother” becomes an all-consuming anxiety for Brent, who comes to view her infant son with “a mixture of love and pain” (*Incidents* 80). Moreover, Brent’s desire to protect her children from Flint’s tyranny is often at odds with her own desire for escape. Flint exploits these jointly held desires to exact even greater emotional abuse on Brent, who tells us he “would often say, with an exulting smile, ‘These brats will bring me a handsome sum of money one of these days’” when he spoke of her children (103). Later, Brent refuses to trust Flint’s promise that she and her children might obtain freedom (by agreeing to live together in a cottage where she would still be required to work for him), and Dr. Flint resolves to send Linda to his son’s plantation. It is only after Brent is warned that her children “were to be brought to the plantation to be ‘broke in’” that

she is “nerved to immediate action,” ultimately subjecting herself to imprisonment in her grandmother’s attic (*Incidents* 121). That Jacobs submits to this imprisonment, however, further demonstrates the complication created by her seemingly oppositional desires: to look after her children (which she ultimately must do without them knowing) while avoiding Dr. Flint’s mistreatment, resisting familial rupture, and liberating herself from enslavement.

Even as Linda remains in hiding in her grandmother’s house, her family is able to keep her updated on Flint’s continued schemes: she knows he “had not given [her] up,” and he continually attempts regain control over her through a variety of manipulative tactics (*Incidents* 163). In response, Brent finally resorts to “cunning” schemes against Dr. Flint, asserting that cunning “is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants” (*Incidents* 130). The need to outwit Flint becomes all the more crucial when Brent goes into hiding at her grandmother’s home for two main reasons: first, because Brent realizes it is in her best interest to allow Flint to believe she has already gone north, and second, because the efforts made by her friends and family to conceal her put them in extreme danger. Initially, Brent takes joy in the mere fact that Flint believes her to be in New York, having “expended considerable money” in his misguided effort to retrieve her (*Incidents* 135). When Brent realizes that Flint is attempting to deceive her family to gain advantage, however, she “resolved to match [her] cunning against his cunning” by writing Flint letters addressed from the North (*Incidents* 163). Brent proudly details the extent of this deception, explaining that she asked her friend to take her letter to New York and “expressed a wish for a New York paper, to ascertain the names of some of the streets” in order to further the letter’s mimicry of authenticity (*Incidents* 163). In Elizabeth Hewitt’s analysis of Jacobs’ mislabeled letters, Jacobs “uses the conceit of letters (that they are honest) to political advantage,” thus constructing “narratives that complicate the truth”

(124). Though Flint in turn misrepresents the content of Brent's letters to her grandmother, her letters become "elemental" to her ability "to travel away from her cell" (Hewitt 130). Brent also utilizes her letter to her grandmother to great effect: by asking her grandmother to "direct her answer to a certain street in Boston" and claiming she only visits New York, Flint's interception of the letter prevents him from attempting to track her down as slaveholders "did not consider [Boston] a comfortable place to go in search of a runaway" (*Incidents* 164, 167).

Eventually, the appearance of travel to the North is no longer sufficient for Linda as she desires to escape the confines of her grandmother's attic. Brent resolves to spend her last hours in the South with her son, Benny, who confesses that he knew she was in hiding and had "been *so* afraid they would catch you!" (197). Though Benny's knowledge of her presence initially surprises Brent, she goes on to assert that "slaves, being surrounded by mysteries, deceptions, and dangers, early learn to be suspicious and watchful, and prematurely cautious and cunning" (198). Just as his mother learned to "match her cunning" with Dr. Flint's, Benny learns to help ensure that no one else realizes Linda is still in the South: Benny alerts his grandmother of potential trouble, and he keeps his sister's friends away from the side of the house where he realizes his mother is hiding so they cannot hear her (197-198). Here, the dynamics of family ties play an interesting role in Brent's pursuit of freedom: Brent constantly defers her flight because she does not want to be separated from her children, but her family at once works to protect her from Flint's advances. In this sense, the desire to maintain family ties necessitates the act of cunning (because Brent could have fled to freedom instead of writing letters only addressed from the North), but her son uses cunning to protect his mother. Brent's grandmother and uncle partake in this cunning as well, pretending they do not know of Linda's whereabouts as they continue to provide her with information about Flint's attempts to deceive them.

Once Brent arrives in the North, Dr. Flint begins to try cunning by writing his own false letters. Jacobs produces the letter within the narrative, which persuades Brent to come home even though it would be “difficult” for her “to return home as a free person,” purports that she “need not apprehend any unkind treatment” as the Flint family claims they have not gone “to any trouble or expense” to capture her, and is “signed by Emily’s brother, who was as yet a mere lad” (*Incidents* 220-221). Brent argues that this attempt at deceit fails because Dr. Flint “relied too much on ‘the stupidity of the African race’”; essentially, that he does not imagine Brent as capable of detecting his dishonesty or of being able to succeed in similar schemes. However, Flint also fails to realize the strength of communication in Linda’s family, which resists absolute rupture—both through their concealment of Brent and later through letter-writing. Brent is fully aware of the Flints’ trips to find her and of her family’s attitudes regarding her escape to the North; she knows that her family is not begging for her return as the letter claims, and the knowledge provided through the family’s communication renders Flint’s scheme ineffective.

In Brown’s novel, cunning takes place in the form of masquerading. Clotel comes closest to her own freedom and self-repossession during her masquerades as she cross-dresses as a white male. It is Clotel’s masquerade as a white man named Mr. Johnson which allows her a kind of boundlessness—and which allows her to rescue a fellow slave named William. Ironically, her would-be impotency as Mr. Johnson (an invalid) allows her to get William on board of the steamer since the invalid Mr. Johnson “did not wish to be delayed owing to his illness” and propels both of them to freedom as they cross the Ohio River (Brown 144). Michael Berthold suggests Clotel’s masquerade “brilliantly parodies slavery’s arrangements of race, gender, and property” which frees Clotel “of the sexual objectification and abuse that dogged the slave woman” (21). While William successfully continues his journey toward freedom in Canada,

Clotel, “true to woman’s nature,” remains compelled to risk “her own liberty for another” (Brown 178). In this sense, Clotel does not properly value her individual freedom; this individual freedom remains incomplete for Clotel because she does not have the agency to travel to Richmond without masquerading, and without traveling to Richmond she does not have the liberty to be with Mary. Through Clotel’s “hyperbolic maternalism,” Brown is capable of inspiring sympathy from white readers who might view the mulatto character in a more humanizing, relatable manner (Berthold 21). Brown’s appeal to pathos and family ties roughly resembles a rhetorical cunning that coincides with Clotel’s deceit against her would-be captives: the audience is meant to humanize this hyper-maternal Clotel even as she defies her master and the law. Unlike Jacobs’ portrayal of familial ties, however, the desire for familial reunion proves damning for Clotel...and the success of her cunning masquerade is forfeited because Clotel feels compelled to find her daughter.

In contrast, Mary engages in a successful masquerade as her imprisoned lover, George. Mary desires to save George “from a felon’s doom” due to the death sentence he receives for participating in a slave revolt, although George only agrees to the masquerade after Mary assures him “that she, not being the person condemned, would not receive any injury” (Brown 192). Unlike Clotel, George’s and Mary’s cunning proves successful in part because George receives support from Northern members of the Society of Friends, and these “true Christians” obstruct the progress of the sheriff who attempts to capture George. Here, Brown suggests that Northern support is imperative to the ultimate success of the cunning slave obtaining his freedom. Similarly, Mary is ultimately freed by Mr. Devenant, who claims to transfer the love he had for his sister to Mary because of their resemblance. Devenant humanizes Mary rather than treating

her as property, and George's eventual reunion with Mary only occurs because of white sympathy.

Finally, Brown achieves a kind of rhetorical cunning as the author of his own authenticating document. Brown begins his novel by manipulating his own slave narrative in order to “distance his authorial persona from his autobiographical self”—a rhetorical move which allows him greater control over readers’ perceptions and affective responses to his story (Fabi xi). This manipulation of personal narrative influences the reading of the fictional chapters of *Clotel*, validating the “authorial persona” and adding credibility to the fiction’s realism. More important, this new iteration of Brown’s narrative modifies the text by eliminating “episodes that showed his cunning and ability to deceive” that were present in his 1847 autobiography” (Fabi xi). The omission of his “trickster” persona is deliberate, and M. Guila Fabi argues this omission minimizes Brown’s former self-presentation in order to adopt a new persona that would “strengthen the reader’s trust” in his fictional representation of slavery (xi). Brown must effectively conceal his cunning in order to represent Clotel’s, Mary’s, and George’s cunning masquerades later in the novel; in contrast, their cunning is seemingly justified by the frequent appeals to their moral character, the detailed accounts of the unjust treatment they receive, and the near-whiteness of their appearance.

Throughout the *Incidents* and *Clotel*, cunning proves to be a necessary strategy for slaves to exert agency against their oppressor’s corruption. In the cases I mention above, cunning also seems to be the final version of deception: to use Brent as an example, cunning truly begins after she has already attempted to ignore Dr. Flint’s attempts at sexual coercion and after other methods of resistance prove insufficient. Letter-writing then becomes the final instance of “cunning against cunning,” first allowing Brent to occupy a new geography (even as she remains

concealed in her grandmother's attic) and later demonstrating Flint's relentless attempts to regain control over Linda as he writes his own dishonest letters to Brent. Still, Brent's cunning is at once enabled by her family ties and all the more necessary because Brent cannot easily leave her children. Clotel's "hyperbolic maternal"ity" undoes her cunning scheme, and her prioritization of family ties over the freedom her masquerade briefly secures her proves to be a fatal compromise. At the same time, George's and Mary's successful masquerades might suggest not only the importance of white support—which is also important for Brent, who is eventually liberated by Mrs. Bruce—but the differences in outcomes over time (provided that white Americans proactively support abolition). Brown depicts abolitionists as themselves engaging in cunning on behalf of George: the benevolent white man conceals George, insists on a warrant, and coyly asks to read the warrant once it is produced, ultimately explaining that the paper does not require him to "supply thee with tools to open my door; if thou wishest to go in, thou must get a hammer elsewhere" (Brown 195). Simply put, cunning does not ensure freedom will be achieved—but it is a necessary step in which the slave, by engaging in cunning, is able to truly begin his or her pursuit of freedom.

CHALLENGES TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Toward the end of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs expresses her disgust at the fact that her manumission is ultimately secured as a "human being *sold* in the free city of New York!" (257). This statement epitomizes Jacobs' broader critique of the United States wrongly regarding itself as a "civil society," and she routinely underscores the ways in which she believes the North to be complicit in the proslavery culture of the South. Just as William Wells Brown writes in *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*, Jacobs also works to dismiss white criticism of the slave's morality through direct addresses to the audience, explaining that

privileged white readers cannot justifiably hold slaves to the same moral standard when they are not extended the same rights under the law. Similarly, Prince critiques slaveholders in the West Indies, speculating that English men “forget God and all feeling of shame [...] since they can see” the violence committed against slaves on the islands (*History* 37). It is through this projection of “[t]he strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, experiencing, appealing, and above all *remembering* his [or her] ordeal in bondage” that allows each narrator to condemn the societies that allow slavery (Step 3). Brown is able to extend his criticism of a “civil society” beyond his own experiences and observations even further through his fiction, and *Clotel*’s central premise (that a founding father of our democratic nation is also the father of unfree children not recognized as citizens). Through a variety of rhetorical methods, these critiques against the morality of any society that does not proactively work to abolish slavery represent the most important function of Jacobs’, Prince’s, and Brown’s works.

In her preface, Jacobs states that the aim of her narrative is not “to excite sympathy for [her] own sufferings,” but rather “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage” (2). Jacobs seldom leaves the work of interpreting the horrors of the female slave’s condition exclusively to Northern women, often relying on direct addresses to force these readers to understand the extent of oppression their black counterparts face. The first of these addresses occurs as Jacobs explains the significance of New Year’s day to “you happy free women,” imploring them to contrast their “pleasant season” with the slave mother’s New Year’s day “laden with peculiar sorrows” (18). The source of this sorrow comes from the slave mother’s knowledge that her children “may all be torn from her in the morning.” Through this comparison—which illustrates the critical difference between the securely protected ties white mothers have to their children and the

constant threat of familial rupture slaves face—Jacobs forces her readers to become cognizant of their ignorance regarding the extent of cruelty under slavery. This comparison also serves to indict a hypocritical society that at once allows and disregards these ruptures between mother and child due to race. Jacobs further dismisses any justifications for separation, explaining that a slave mother “may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies” (18).

Another direct address that illustrates the hypocrisy of a Northern society complicit in slavery comes when Jacobs discloses the circumstances of her first pregnancy. She again implores “the happy women, whose purity has been sheltered since childhood,” not to “judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!” (*Incidents* 69). Jacobs goes on to chastise her audience for holding her to their standards of morality, explaining to complicit readers that “[i]f slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by laws” (69). The argument here is essentially that the “virtuous reader” cannot rightfully judge the slave girl’s morality because they “never knew what it was to be a slave,” but the larger attack on a so-called civil society is that the corrupt laws that make slavery permissible become the means to judge an individual’s morality (even those individuals not protected by the law). More generally, Jacobs’ suggestion of Northern hypocrisy reiterates a common slave narrative strategy by pointing to “the moral bankruptcy of social law” (Gould 15). By indirectly arguing that the United States is morally bankrupt, Jacobs ultimately exerts her agency over “an abolitionist culture that readily figured African Americans as culturally deficient” (Gould 25). Rather than conceding to these stereotypes, she asserts that the corrupt institution of slavery will necessarily produce slaves who, in their desperation, have little choice but to compromise their morality.

William Wells Brown uses direct addresses in *Clotel* to address many of the same issues as Jacobs does. In his self-narrative, Brown recalls part of his own family's rupture when he returns from "an employment much against his own feelings" only to find that his master "resolved to sell William's sister and two brothers" (12). William witnesses—and experiences—the inhumanity of a slave culture that seemingly has no lesser evils; he witnesses a slave literally beaten to death when he is hired out by Walker, but the eventual alternative results in his own familial rupture. The uncivilized behavior of his master becomes even more apparent when we learn that William will be sold as well (even though he knows Brown is his nephew, which might suggest a proslavery culture that is more eager to disregard its family ties than the supposedly "immoral" race it enslaves). These events lead up to William's final meeting with his sister, who tells him she knows "she must live and die a slave" (13). In response, the narrator asks

Reader, did ever a fair sister of thine go down to the grave prematurely, if so, perchance, thou hast drank deeply from the cup of sorrow? But how infinitely better is it for a sister to 'go into the silent land' with her honour untarnished, but with bright hopes, than for her to be sold to sensual slaveholders (13).

Though this address appeals to pathos by asking readers if they know the same sorrow Brown does, readers are also forced to acknowledge the narrator's claim that "sensual slaveholders" are the ones who tarnish a slave's "honour" through the slaveholder's immoral actions.

Clotel also demonstrates how the economic principles that drive slavery necessarily govern the socioeconomics of those subjected to slavery—and devalue human beings by ascribing them with a cost of purchase. In the chapter entitled "The Negro Sale", the narrator quotes the law that states the dehumanizing terms of slave purchase:

A slave is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor. He can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything, but what must belong to his master. The slave is entirely subject to the will of his master” (Brown 43).

What goes unaddressed in this description of the slave’s (lack of) rights is how “familial relations [seem] irrevocably lost” due to “the evil of the economics” (Baker, Jr.). Upon being sold to Horatio, Clotel is permanently separated from her mother and sister—and she later dies in her failed attempt to reunite with Mary. Because Clotel is herself a commodity, she has no means to gain capital, and her freedom can only be truly secured if she achieves a successful reunion with her daughter: in a sense, part of the definition of ‘freedom’ entails being free to live with one’s family. Clotel’s failure at reunion—and freedom—demonstrates the notion that “economics *must be mastered* before liberation can be secured” (Baker, Jr.).

Brown addresses the objectification of quadroon and mulatto women who “are distinguished for their fascinating beauty,” noting that “[t]he handsomest usually pays the highest price for her time” (Brown 46). The narrator directly addresses the “Reader” once again, explaining “when you take into consideration the fact, that amongst the slave population no safeguard is thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave women to be chaste, you will not be surprised [...] that immorality and vice pervade the cities of the Southern States” (46). Additionally, the narrator argues that slave women are justified if their pursuit is ultimately to become “the finely-dressed mistress of a white man.” Brown asserts that those in the Northern States are not equipped to pass judgment on black morality because cities in the free states do not possess the same pervasive climate of moral bankruptcy as Southern cities do. The “evils of economics” are almost directly linked to slavery—and in a sense, divided by the

opposing geographies of the North and South: Southern men pay for sexual partnerships with the mulatto and quadroon women (who would have virtually no means to refuse these relationships), but the North seemingly remains complicit if for no other reason than its collectively ignorant judgment against the slaves' morality.

In the *History*, Mary Prince condemns the immorality of slavery through her own depiction of her family's separation and through the rhetorical questions she asks of the white people at the slave market. Prince begins by discussing the terror she felt as she stood by her mother and sisters, feeling as though her heart "would burst out of my body" (11). She continues the account by asking "[d]id one of the many by-standers, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no!" (*History* 11). These careless bystanders share culpability in the cruel mistreatments under chattel slavery, yet Prince concedes these white bystanders "were not all bad." Nonetheless, Prince suggests "slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks; and many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us [her soon-to-be separated family] aloud, without regard to our grief" (11). Much like Jacobs' and Brown's appeals to the ignorant naïve citizens of the North, Prince intends for this recollection to elucidate the barbaric attitudes in British territories to her British readers. Her inclusion of the bystanders' apathy—and even their ruthlessness—implicitly shifts complicity to England for allowing slavery to continue on their islands, and it also suggests British naiveté to the slaves' mistreatment in the West Indies is enough to perpetuate cruelty.

While Prince believes slaveholders "forget God," Brown indicts those proslavery Christians who use their faith to justify slavery. Specifically, Brown argues that ministers have strayed from telling Christianity's true messages of unconditional love and acceptance for others

and instead have become “mere echoes, instead of correctors, of public sentiment” (46). This description is particularly appropriate of Rev. John Peck, who notably shifts from a Northern-born and –educated upbringing to a Southern slaveholder. Peck is not the cruelest slave owner, but his daughter, Georgiana, exposes his misguided views of Christian law justifying slavery. Georgiana and her eventual husband Carlton represent the version of Christianity for which Brown himself wants to advocate. Though Carlton is introduced to readers as a religious skeptic and “a disciple of Rousseau,” Georgiana convinces him that a faith in God does not need to conflict with the idea that there is “no difference between white men and black men as it regards liberty” (Brown 73). Through Georgiana, Brown bridges the divide between the rational (Rousseau) and divine faith, correcting her reverend father on his misinterpretation of religion and Carlton’s misinterpretation that faith cannot coexist with rationality. Georgiana’s outspokenness toward the men in her life allows for an interpretation of a feminist challenge to patriarchy, and in this way her role as a woman places her in solidarity with the slaves for whom she advocates. Additionally, Georgiana and Carlton represent a new generation of American religious thought; though Reverend Peck needs to continually be convinced of the wrongs of slavery, the treatment of Georgiana and Carlton suggests that the next generation of white American Christians can spearhead the cause of abolition.

Starting with the title, *Clotel: or, the President’s Daughter* makes symbolic critiques against the hypocrisy of American society. Throughout the narration, Clotel is repeatedly referred to as Thomas Jefferson’s daughter. While Jefferson is not a character in the plot, the fact that he is “the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic” is frequently used to underscore the irony that his daughters “were disposed of to the highest bidder!” (Brown 51). Still, the facts of Clotel’s parentage go beyond

offering a means to demonstrate the hypocrisy of a nation that considers itself to be free and democratic; the simpler fact that her father is white serves to trivialize racial divisions of freedom, and it also calls into question whether a society where white men disregard their children can be considered civil. In this society, Clotel is treated as property rather than as “Columbia’s daughter” (186). Because slavery remains legal, the American government and uncivil society are inextricably connected. This tie is further illustrated beyond the link between Clotel and Jefferson, extending to her relationship with Horatio Green: though Green owns her, they initially engage in a romantic relationship in which Clotel is nearly treated as a free individual. Still, their unofficial marriage “sanctioned by heaven, although unrecognized on earth” fails to protect Clotel from the political “ambition to become a statesman [that] was slowly gaining ascendancy over” Horatio. Laws do not protect their union, and Horatio’s political ambition inevitably requires separation from this relationship with Clotel. Instead, Horatio chooses marry a white woman, Gertrude, to gain the necessary social standing—and though he gradually develops fondness for his wife, Horatio’s initial rejection of love in favor of social status reiterates the immoral nature of the slave state. That Horatio falls out of love with Clotel and would not have been “inclined to aid her” if he had known of her arrest in Richmond because “[s]he was not his slave” suggests that chattel slavery corrupts romance as well (188).

Brown’s novel ends with a nonfictional debriefing, assuring readers that “the various incidents and scenes related [are] founded in truth” (208). He reiterates the hypocrisies displayed by Reverend Peck’s ownership of slaves through the factual statistic that there are “in all, 660,563 slaves owned by members of the Christian church in this pious democratic republic!” (208). Here, Brown’s indictment of a “pious democratic republic” allows him to appeal to his target audience of “British Christians” to catalyze abolition in the United States. In

this way, *Clotel* becomes a call for transnational collective action against the injustices and inequalities of slavery. These lessons alone may not be enough to inspire action, but *Clotel* engages in the important first step of humanizing the American slave, granting the American slave visibility, and pleading for an end to the injustices they face within an uncivil society that cannot acknowledge itself as such.

Finally, Jacobs uses *Incidents* to refute the notion that the United States can be regarded as “civil society” while slavery remains legal. When Brent is forced to hide in the swamp in order to avoid Dr. Flint’s detection, her fears of “large, venomous snakes were less dreadful” than the alternative of facing “the white men in that community called civilized” who would punish her for escaping slavery (*Incidents* 145). Jacobs later suggests that “snakes and slaveholders” are one in the same, but she condemns the North for their complicity because of those northerners who adhere to the Fugitive Slave Act. Moreover, Jacobs acknowledges that she was “in fact, a slave in New York, as subject to slave laws” as she would have been in the South; she concludes this is a “[s]trange incongruity in a State called free!” (249). Brent strengthens this argument by sharing the response Mrs. Bruce (who employs her to take care of her daughter) offers to her pro-slavery relative regarding the illegality of Mrs. Bruce assisting Brent: “I am very well aware of it. It is imprisonment and one thousand dollars fine. Shame on my country that it *is* so! I am ready to incur the penalty. I will go to the state’s prison, rather than have any poor victim torn from *my* house, to be carried back to slavery” (249). Here, Mrs. Bruce echoes Thoreau’s sentiment in “Civil Disobedience” that “[u]nder a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.” Although Brent appreciates Mrs. Bruce’s shared sense of justice, she is frustrated by the fact that Mrs. Bruce secures Brent’s freedom by paying “those who had so grievously oppressed” her—and Brent

feels payment requires that she consider herself “an article of property” (256). Ultimately, Brent implies that even the freedom secured by her and her children is not enough to classify the United States as civil society; in other words, her liberation does not negate the fact that thousands of African Americans remain legally enslaved, and free African Americans are still discriminated against in the “free” North.

By questioning the morality of any society condoning slavery, Brown, Jacobs, and Prince are able to call into question the moral judgments of those readers who might be critical of black morality. More importantly, Brown and Jacobs indict the North for its complicity in allowing slavery to continue in the United States; and Prince makes a similar (if less forceful) indictment against the British. These charges of complicity suggest that naiveté toward the extent of slaves’ mistreatment is no excuse for their tolerance of the institution. With *Clotel*, the criticism of an American society condoning slavery is symbolically rooted to the nation’s motto as the land of the free. Brown makes this point more explicitly in his own narrative, explaining that “England is, indeed, the ‘land of free, and the home of the brave’” because the English recognize him “as a man and an equal” (32). In the *Incidents*, Jacobs

provides a double critique of nineteenth-century American ideas and institutions. It inevitably challenges the institution of chattel slavery and its supporting ideology of white racism; just as inevitably, it challenges traditional patriarchal institutions and ideas (Yellin 270).

The society Jacobs portrays is far from civilized. Instead, *Incidents* unveils a version of the United States where slave mothers often must accept separation from their children as laws protect white families; where slave girls inevitably have their ‘purity’ compromised in a culture where women are devalued through the loss of their virginity; where so-called Christians express

their hope to see slaves suffer for desiring an escape from oppression and Southern ministers use religion as a means for social control; and finally, we see a United States that espouses freedom without regard for equality as an essentially component. If we accept Linda Brent's challenge to use the document certifying her freedom as a means "to measure the progress of civilization in the United States," the results might not prove as optimistic as today's civil society might choose to believe. As Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow*, today's United States has largely substituted mass incarceration for slavery and Jim Crow, implementing a new "system of social control unparalleled in world history" at the same time we argue differential treatment no longer exists in "the era of colorblindness" (2, 8). While obvious progress has been made (slavery is no longer legal), patriarchy and race continue to create differences among individuals and their ability to achieve success—and therefore, the inroads made by authors like Brown and Jacobs must continue to be built upon.

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